Chapter One
Prairie Plat

There are two kinds of towns in Illinois. The first kind was put there by a river or a harbor or some other act of God that made men say, "Well, here's as good a spot as any to unload the wagon." The second kind was put there by a railroad company or a land speculator or some other act of commerce that made men say, "Well, if we say it's a town, maybe people will come."

Rochelle was neither, which is probably why it lasted.

What became Rochelle in the 1850s was simply the place where two wagon trails got tired of wandering and decided to cross. North-south met east-west in the middle of a prairie so flat you could watch your dog run away for three days, and someone, history doesn't record who (which is often the case with good ideas) looked at that crossroads and thought: general store. Then someone else thought: blacksmith. Then someone else thought: hotel, because people crossing prairies do appreciate a bed that isn't moving. So, in 1856, on the Northeast corner of what would become Cherry Avenue and Main Street, the Baxter House Hotel was opened. Later it would become the Rochelle House. Eventually, the Collier Hotel was built on the same site.

Eventually, the settlement needed a name. It allegedly began with the humble name of "Hickory Grove." But settlers soon formalized their community, and in 1853, the area was officially incorporated as the town of Lane. Life in Lane proceeded normally for the growing Midwestern settlement until a notorious event forever altered its reputation. On June 19, 1861, a grim incident occurred in the town center: a man accused of burning down several grain warehouses was taken from jail and summarily hanged by an angry mob. This act of frontier justice, injustice actually, immediately tainted Lane, causing it to become widely and unofficially known by the unflattering nickname, "Hangtown."

Understandably, the town's leaders were eager to shed this dark and violent association. A few years after the event, officials met to brainstorm a new, more respectable identity. The location for this momentous decision was fittingly utilitarian: the store that would eventually become the Barker and Sullivan Rexall Pharmacy. As the town fathers debated various proposals, someone's gaze happened to fall upon a bottle of Rochelle Salts displayed on a shelf. Rochelle salts was a common remedy of the time, often used as a laxative. Seizing on the idea, one official humorously suggested the name, noting that perhaps the town itself needed a "good cleaning out" to purge the stigma of "Hangtown."

The suggestion, born of necessity and dark humor, stuck. The town officials formally approved the change, and in 1865, "Lane" was officially renamed "Rochelle," drawing its fresh identity from a bottle of medicine. The new name successfully distanced the community from the grim incident of 1861, providing a clean slate and allowing the city to move forward with a more cheerful and less notorious moniker.

The early commercial core went up quick, the way these things did: false-front buildings, wood-frame hopeful, paint optional. Men built what they needed and called it architecture. For a dozen years Rochelle looked like every other prairie town that was one lightning strike away from erasure. which is exactly what happened, twice, in the

manner of frontier towns that hadn't yet learned that wood and optimism are a dangerous combination.

The fires came in the late 1860s and early 1870s, the way fires did back then when volunteer bucket brigades were no match for a good wind and a dry summer. The first fire took the north side of Main Street. The second took what the first one missed. When the smoke cleared, Rochelle's founding generation looked at the ashes and had to decide whether to rebuild or admit the prairie had won.

They rebuilt. But this time, and this is the part that matters, they rebuilt in brick.

The downtown that rose from those ashes, starting in 1871, was a different animal altogether. Italianate cornices, cast-iron storefronts, limestone sills. the kind of construction that said *we're staying*. The buildings were modest, as befitted a prairie crossroads, but they were solid. They had heft. When you walked past them you could feel the difference between a town that *hoped* to last and a town that *intended* to.

That fabric. those brick-and-mortar optimists from 1871 and the years just after. would become, a century and a half later, the Rochelle Downtown Historic District, listed on the National Register on the last day of 2018. But in 1871 nobody was thinking about historic districts. They were thinking about getting the store reopened before

winter, and if the railroads everyone kept talking about would ever actually arrive.

The railroads, as it happened, had plans.

But that's the next chapter.

Chapter Two
Crossroads Built

Like everything of lasting importance, the railroads arrived in stages, giving the town's residents time to argue over their merits. The first tracks were laid early in the town's history, while it was still called Lane. The Air Line Railroad completed its route through the community in 1854, followed just a year later in 1855 by the Galena and Chicago Union Railroad, which would later become part of the Union Pacific system. While these lines connected the growing settlement to the wider world, the true transformation began when the Chicago and Iowa Rail Road laid its tracks through town in 1871. This arrival was either excellent timing or terrible

timing, depending on whether residents were rebuilding from an earlier fire or trying to decide if the town was worth rebuilding at all. The railroad settled the question: a town with a depot was a town with a future, and Rochelle suddenly had both.

The town's true destiny was sealed not by the arrival of a single line, but by the strategic junction it created. What started as a modest depot, practical and unadorned, evolved into the physical crossing of what would become two massive national systems: the Chicago and North Western (C&NW) and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy (CB&Q). This crossing made all the difference, creating a rare geographical sweet spot.

Rochelle sat directly in the middle of this crucial intermodal exchange, collecting the benefits of becoming an essential American railway hub. The importance of this site was underscored when, between 1898 and 1899, the C&NW returned to build a second main line track through the city, ensuring Rochelle's continued prominence on the continental map.

The depot itself was a modest affair, built in the practical style of structures that exist to move freight and people rather than impress them. But it stood at the crossing of what would one day become two major lines, the Chicago and North Western and the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy,

and that crossing made all the difference. Rochelle sat in the middle and collected the benefits.

Main Street, fresh in its new brick clothes, began to fill in proper. The post office arrived, which meant the town was official in the eyes of Washington. The Masonic lodge went up, then the Odd Fellows, then the other fraternal organizations that men in small towns joined so they could wear ceremonial aprons and call each other Brother and feel part of something larger than the dry goods trade. The lodges built halls with meeting rooms upstairs and storefronts below, which was good business and good fellowship in the same structure.

Churches followed, as churches do. The Methodists built in 1872, the Presbyterians a few years after, then the Catholics and the Lutherans and the Baptists, each congregation staking its claim to a corner lot and the souls nearby. On Sunday mornings the bells rang in sequence, a kind of ecclesiastical roll call, and people walked to the church that fit their theology or their family or their habit. It didn't much matter which. The point was you went.

By 1880 Rochelle had fifteen hundred people, three hotels, two newspapers, a brewery, and all the other apparatus of civic ambition. The Commercial House offered rooms for two dollars a night. The Rochelle Register and the Rochelle News competed for subscriptions and advertising,

which meant they competed to see who could report the same town council meeting with more adjectives. There were milliners and harness makers and a fellow who sold insurance against fire, which was no longer theoretical.

The 1890s brought electricity, which changed evening commerce, and telephones, which changed gossip, and a new generation of children who had never known Rochelle as anything but a railroad town. The depot platform was the most important piece of real estate in town. If you wanted to see who was coming or going, who was important or thought they were, you went to the depot. Drummers came through selling everything from farm equipment to patent medicine. Families waited for relatives arriving from Chicago or departing for California. The station agent knew everyone's business, which gave him a kind of informal authority that didn't appear on any organizational chart but mattered just the same.

Main Street prospered. The storefronts that had risen from ash now hosted second and third generations of merchants. Sons took over their fathers' businesses. Daughters married into other families' businesses. The commercial blocks became a kind of extended family tree built in brick, everyone connected by blood or credit or the shared experience of selling things to the same customers for decades.

The lodges thrived. On meeting nights the men climbed the narrow stairs to the second-floor halls and conducted their rituals, which were secret in theory but generally known in practice because small towns don't keep secrets well. What mattered wasn't the mystery but the membership. Belonging to the Masons or the Odd Fellows or the Knights of Pythias meant you were part of the town's structure, woven into its social fabric. The same men who voted on lodge business voted on school board business and church vestry business. The networks overlapped until you couldn't tell where one ended and another began.

By 1910 Rochelle had four thousand people and a certain confidence about itself. The brick downtown was solid. The trains ran on schedule. The lodges were full. The post office handled more mail every year. If you had told someone in 1871, standing in the ashes, that forty years later the town would look like this, they would have called you crazy. But there it was.

And then in 1913, someone in Detroit had an idea about a road.

The Lincoln Highway Association announced its plan to build a coast-to-coast automobile route from New York to San Francisco, and after considerable argument and negotiation and the kind of politicking that goes into deciding where a road should go, the route was chosen. It would run

through Chicago, then west across Illinois, and it would run right down Main Street, Rochelle.

The highway wouldn't be paved for years yet. In fact, it would remain largely a brick road for several years. And in 1913 it was more concept than brick or concrete, more hope than asphalt. But the idea was enough. Rochelle, which had become a railroad crossroads by luck and by geography, was about to become a highway crossroads as well. East would meet west again, but this time on rubber tires instead of steel rails.

The men in the lodges talked about what it would mean. The merchants on Main Street talked about what it would mean. The newspaper editors wrote editorials about what it would mean. Everyone agreed it would mean something. They just weren't sure what yet.

The answer would arrive with the next generation, the one that grew up thinking automobiles were normal and roads were destiny.

Chapter Three
Motors & Moderns

The

automobile changed everything, but it did so gradually that people could pretend it wasn't happening until it already had.

In 1917 there were still more horses than cars on Main Street, but the ratio was shifting. The livery stables were becoming garages. The harness makers were learning about fan belts. The hotels that had catered to train passengers were adding parking areas for the new visitors who arrived dusty and triumphant from navigating two hundred miles of questionable road. The future had arrived, and it needed oil changes.

The Lincoln Highway, which in 1913 had been more ambition than asphalt, began to harden into

reality. The route through Rochelle was official: Illinois Route 38, running straight down Main Street, connecting Chicago to the west. In the early years it was gravel and optimism. Then it was graded gravel and slightly more optimism. Then, in sections, it became concrete, and suddenly the trip from Chicago that had taken two days of misery took half a day of mere discomfort.

Rochelle found itself hosting a new kind of traveler. These weren't people visiting relatives or conducting business. These were tourists, a species that hadn't existed in meaningful numbers before the automobile made it possible to be somewhere for no reason except to say you had been there. They needed gasoline, food, lodging, and someone to tell them how much farther to Iowa. Rochelle provided all of it.

Service stations appeared, first as pumps in front of existing businesses, then as dedicated buildings with hydraulic lifts and racks of tires and men in coveralls who could diagnose engine trouble by listening to it complain. Diners opened to serve the travelers who wanted a hot meal faster than the hotel dining room could provide it. In the 50s, a motor court sprang up across from the high school for people who were too tired to make it to the next town or too flush to care.

Main Street, which had been built for railroad commerce, adapted to automobiles. The storefronts stayed the same, but the clientele

expanded. A merchant who used to sell only to local farmers now sold to anyone passing through. The widow who ran the dry goods store suddenly had customers from Indiana asking about prices. The druggist kept his soda fountain open later because travelers wanted ice cream at odd hours.

The 1920s were good to Rochelle, the way they were good to most places that had something to sell and a road to sell it on. The town grew to five thousand people. New schools went up. The churches added Sunday school wings. The lodges, still going strong, added ladies' auxiliaries so the wives could have their own meetings and call each other Sister and feel part of something larger than the church circle.

And then in 1925, something happened that would shape Rochelle's economy for the next seventy years: Calpak, which would eventually become Del Monte, acquired Rochelle Canneries.

The cannery had been there in some form for years, the way food processing operations tend to appear wherever crops grow and workers need wages. But the Calpak acquisition meant something different. It meant ties to a national brand. It meant trucks arriving from farms across the region. It meant seasonal work that brought in extra hands during harvest. It meant the smell of tomatoes and beans and corn cooking down in huge vats, a smell that settled over certain

neighborhoods depending on the wind and which vegetables were running that week.

The cannery became part of Rochelle's identity in the casual way that workplaces become part of a town. Men and women who worked the line during the harvest knew each other from church or lodge or school. Families planned their summers around the harvest schedule. High school kids looking for work knew the cannery was hiring. The plant didn't dominate the economy the way the railroads did, but it mattered.

The Depression came in 1929 and stayed too long, the way it did everywhere. Rochelle weathered it better than some places and worse than others. The trains still ran. The highway still carried traffic, though less of it, and the travelers who did come through spent less money. The cannery kept operating because people still needed to eat, though they ate more carefully. Merchants extended credit to neighbors they had known for thirty years. Lodges waived dues for members who couldn't pay. Churches organized relief efforts. The town pulled in on itself and waited.

The waiting lasted a decade.

When the economy finally stirred in the late 1930s, it was rearmament that did it. Europe was headed for war again, and America was selling them the means. Factories retooled. Farms increased production. Young men started thinking

about uniforms. Rochelle, which had sent its sons to France in 1917, started getting ready to send another generation.

Pearl Harbor came in December 1941, and after that the war was no longer something happening elsewhere. The depot platform filled with boys in uniform heading to training camps. Gold stars appeared in windows. Scrap drives collected metal. Victory gardens sprouted in every spare lot. The cannery ran overtime to supply the military. Women took jobs that had been men's jobs and proved surprisingly good at them, which surprised no one except the men.

The Second World War touched Rochelle not with the drama of the front lines, but through the quieter channels of sacrifice and industry. For many residents, the conflict remained a distant storm, filtered through letters, newspaper reports, and the chilling finality of an occasional casualty telegram that stopped a family's heart. The town did its essential part on the home front, sending its children to fight, buying war bonds, rationing sugar and gasoline, and trying not to complain.

Yet, Rochelle was far from being just a spectator. While the town might have been geographically distant from major ports or aircraft plants, it housed a crucial engine of the war machine: the Whitcomb Locomotive Company. A manufacturer of train engines, Whitcomb operated in Rochelle for over forty years and proved to be a vital

contributor to the national defense effort. During the war, the company shifted production to build robust locomotives, specifically diesel-electric switchers for the US Army, ensuring that heavy materiel could be moved efficiently across military bases and supply lines both domestically and overseas. Though the factory eventually closed its doors in 1952, its mechanical legacy endures, with many of the reliable engines built in Rochelle still preserved and celebrated in railroad museums across the country.

When the war ended in 1945, the boys started coming home. Not all of them, but enough. They came back changed, which everyone expected, and they came back restless, which fewer people expected. They had seen San Francisco and North Africa and the Pacific. They had ideas about what life could be beyond Rochelle. Some of them stayed anyway. Some of them left. The ones who stayed married their high school sweethearts or the girls from the next town over. They used the G.I. Bill to buy houses on the new streets being platted on the edges of town. They took jobs at the cannery or the railroad or the new businesses that were starting up.

The Lincoln Highway was paved now, properly paved, all the way through. Route 30 (which was changed to Route 38 in 1971) was a genuine highway, not just an optimistic name on a map. On summer weekends the traffic was steady, people

driving somewhere or driving back, stopping in Rochelle for gas and pie and directions.

The depot was still busy. The trains still mattered. But now there were two kinds of commerce, rail and road, and Rochelle sat at the crossing of both. The town had earned the nickname it had been using informally for years.

Hub City.

The next thirty years would prove whether the nickname was prophecy or just good marketing.

Chapter Four
Hub Years

The postwar years were good to Rochelle in the way they were good to most American small towns that had something to offer and a population ready to offer it. The soldiers came home, married, started families, and went looking for steady work. The town obliged.

The Lincoln Highway, now fully paved and increasingly busy, continued to run straight through the heart of downtown. Every car that passed was a potential customer. Every truck that stopped was commerce. The service stations did steady business. The diners stayed open late. The motor courts added cabins. Rochelle had learned to profit from motion.

The railroads remained the anchor. The crossing of the Burlington and the North Western lines

meant freight and passengers, jobs and revenue, the daily rhythm of whistles and crossing bells that small railroad towns measured their lives by. Boys grew up wanting to work for the railroad, the way their fathers and grandfathers had. It was good money, union wages, a pension at the end. You could raise a family on it.

The downtown remained solid. The same brick storefronts that had risen in 1871 were still there, housing third and sometimes fourth generation businesses. The old families were still the old families. The lodges were still full. The churches were adding to their Sunday school wings again because the baby boom needed somewhere to hear about Noah's ark. Main Street at noon on Saturday looked like a Sears catalog come to life, everyone in their good clothes, shopping and visiting and catching up on the week's news.

Although little-remembered today, from the end of World War II through the Sixties, Rochelle was also known as the nation’s asparagus capital. Word on the street was that late at night you could go out to the asparagus fields an hear it grow. Unfortunately, this was never scientifically documented.

And then in 1960, two things happened that would shape the next chapter of Rochelle's story.

The first was Swift and Company, which decided to build a hog and cattle slaughter operation on the edge of town. The plant would process

livestock from across the region, shipping meat by rail and truck to markets everywhere. It would employ hundreds. It would require infrastructure. The city responded by building a three million gallon per day trickling filter wastewater treatment plant, which was exactly the kind of unglamorous civic achievement that makes a town possible but never makes the newspapers interesting.

The second thing that happened in 1960 was that a group of high school seniors graduated.

This is always happening, of course. Every spring produces a new crop of graduates, and every fall they scatter to jobs or college or military service. But the Class of 1960 graduated at a particular moment, when the town was pivoting between what it had been and what it might become. Swift was hiring. Northern Illinois University was expanding. The draft was still pulling young men into service, though Vietnam was not yet on anyone's map. The choices that had always been there, stay or go, factory or college, marry young or wait, suddenly felt more consequential.

Some context helps. The Rochelle Township High School classes of the late 1950s and early 1960s knew each other the way small town cohorts always do, which is to say completely. The Class of '58 had older siblings who had graduated in the early fifties. The Class of '62 had younger siblings

coming up behind. Everyone knew which families worked the railroad, which ones ran the downtown stores, which ones would be hiring on at Swift or the cannery that had been operating since the twenties. Friday night football games were civic events. The gym dances drew everyone. Summer jobs were negotiated through family connections and church networks and the lodge ties that still mattered.

The Class of '60 sat right in the middle of this. They were the ones who graduated the year Swift opened, the year the town built the big treatment plant, the year the choices got real. Some of them took jobs at the new plant. Some went to NIU, thirty miles away, close enough to come home on weekends. Some enlisted. Some married high school sweethearts and stayed. Some married high school sweethearts and left. A few went to Chicago or farther, following opportunities or restlessness or both.

The Tatler was the RTHS yearbook that documented each class with photographs and club rosters and senior prophecies and advertisements from local businesses wishing the graduates well. The 1960 Tatler captured an interesting moment in time: a class that had grown up in the stability of the fifties and was graduating into the uncertainty of the sixties. The senior pictures showed young men in jackets and ties, young women in careful hairdos, everyone looking serious and hopeful in

the way eighteen year olds do when someone points a camera at them.

The advertisements in the back of the yearbook told their own story. The businesses that sponsored pages were the businesses that had been there for decades and expected to be there for decades more. The bank. The furniture store. The John Deere dealer. The insurance agency. The assumption was continuity. The assumption was that these graduates would stay, or if they left would come back, and would eventually become the customers and the business owners and the lodge members and the church pillars.

Some of them did exactly that. Some of them did something else entirely. Both groups were right.

The early sixties rolled on. The Class of '61 graduated and dispersed. The Class of '62 graduated and dispersed, though not before fielding a football team whose defense gave up only twenty-six points all season, which became a legend that old men still tell in the coffee shops. Viet Nam began to matter. The draft calls increased. The casualty lists started appearing in the Rochelle News Leader. Gold stars went up in windows again, two decades after the last war. Sadly, Gary Futrell, from the class of 1960, was killed in Viet Nam in the summer of 1966.

Life in Rochelle continued. Swift operated at capacity. The cannery, now owned by Del Monte, processed vegetables every summer. The trains ran

on schedule. Route 30 carried steady traffic. Downtown stayed busy. The lodges met. The churches had potlucks. High school classes graduated every spring, and every spring the question was the same: stay or go?

The seventies and eighties brought change in the way that decades do, which is to say gradually and then all at once. The downtown began to feel the pressure from shopping centers being built on the edges of town. Main Street merchants who had been confident in 1960 were nervous by 1980. Some businesses closed. Some moved. Some adapted. The storefronts that had survived fires and depression and war now faced the quiet attrition of changing retail patterns.

The railroad remained important but differently. Freight traffic increased while passenger traffic declined. The depot that had been the social center of town in 1900 was now just a place where trains passed through. The crossing of the Burlington Northern and the Union Pacific lines still mattered, but fewer people noticed.

Swift changed hands, becoming part of larger corporate structures. The cannery changed hands too. The names on the paychecks changed but the work stayed roughly the same. People still needed jobs. Rochelle still provided them.

And then in the 1990s someone had an idea about the trains.

Rochelle had always been a railroad town, but it had taken the trains for granted the way you take for granted anything that has always been there. A hundred trains a day passed through the diamond where the two lines crossed. Railfans, that peculiar species of enthusiast who loves trains the way other people love birds or stamps, had known about Rochelle for years. They would park near the tracks with cameras and notebooks and thermoses of coffee, watching and recording and timing.

In the mid-nineties the city decided to formalize this. If people wanted to watch trains, why not give them a proper place to do it? Why not make it official? Why not make it a destination?

On August 30, 1998, Rochelle Railroad Park opened. It was a simple idea: a park built specifically for train watching, with a pavilion and benches and a clear view of the diamond where a hundred and twenty trains a day crossed. It was free. It was public. It was the kind of civic amenity that sounds odd until you see it work.

It works beautifully.

People come from across the country to sit in the park and watch trains. They bring cameras and radios tuned to railroad frequencies. They bring their children and grandchildren. They meet other railfans and trade information about train schedules and locomotive types and which freight companies ran the best equipment. The park has become, improbably, a tourist attraction.

Rochelle had always been Hub City. Now it had proof.

The park opened the year the Class of '60 turned fifty-six, the year the Class of '62 turned fifty-four, the year those who had scattered began to think about coming back for reunions and seeing what had changed and what had stayed the same. Some of them came back and were surprised. Some came back and weren't. Some never left in the first place.

The town they returned to, or stayed in, or remembered from a distance, was not the town they had graduated from in 1960. But it was recognizably the same town. The brick storefronts were still there. Main Street still ran straight through downtown. Route 30 still carried traffic. The trains still came through, more of them than ever. The choices were still the same: stay or go, put down roots or follow restlessness, build something here or build something elsewhere.

Rochelle in 1998 was still Hub City. The railroads had made it that. The Lincoln Highway had confirmed it. The park had celebrated it. And a generation of graduates who had grown up in the late fifties and early sixties, who had made their choices and lived their lives and raised their families, were starting to look back and see how it had all turned out.

That's the thing about hubs. People leave, but the hub remains. And sometimes, if you're lucky, people come back.

Chapter Five
Rails & Reinvention

The

Railroad Park turned out to be exactly the kind of good idea that seems obvious only after someone has it.

Within a year of opening, the park was hosting visitors from forty states and a dozen countries. Railfans are a dedicated tribe, and they travel. A crossing where a hundred and twenty trains pass daily, visible from a comfortable pavilion with free parking and clean restrooms, is their version of Mecca. They came with expensive cameras and cheap lawn chairs, with notebooks full of locomotive numbers and thermoses full of coffee. They compared notes on train schedules and

freight car markings. They knew which trains ran on which days and got genuinely excited about rare locomotive types the way other people get excited about rare birds.

The local economy noticed. The hotels filled with train watchers. The restaurants learned to stay open later because railfans keep odd hours, their schedules dictated by freight timetables rather than normal human rhythms. The gas stations did steady business. Even the downtown shops saw an uptick. People who came to watch trains discovered they also needed lunch, or a souvenir, or directions to the next good train watching spot fifty miles west.

Rochelle leaned into it. The city added more amenities to the park. Local businesses started advertising themselves as railfan friendly. The chamber of commerce put trains on everything. If you were going to be Hub City, you might as well commit to the brand.

But branding only takes you so far, and the early 2000s tested small Midwestern towns in ways that pavilions and freight schedules couldn't fix.

The retail landscape was shifting, and downtown Rochelle felt it. The shopping center on the edge of town pulled customers away from Main Street. The shopping centers with their acres of parking and their predictable chains offered convenience that the old downtown storefronts couldn't match. One by one, businesses that had operated for

generations closed or relocated. The furniture store that had sponsored yearbook pages since the 1950s shut its doors. The dime store became a memory. The storefronts that had survived fires and depression and war now faced something harder to fight, which was irrelevance.

Some buildings sat empty. Some were converted to offices or apartments. Some hung on with new owners trying new concepts, selling antiques or coffee or the kind of boutique items that depend on foot traffic that wasn't always there. The Lincoln Highway through downtown in 2005 looked tired in a way it hadn't in 1960 or even 1980.

The plants shifted too. Swift had changed hands multiple times, becoming part of corporate mergers and restructurings that meant little to the workers on the line but everything to the accountants reviewing efficiency reports. The cannery, by then owned by Silgan after passing through Del Monte's hands, continued processing cans but with fewer workers and more automation. The jobs were still there, but fewer of them, and the ones that remained required different skills than the ones that had sustained families and provided summer jobs that helped high school grads get through college in the 60s.

The railroads, ironically, stayed strong. Freight traffic increased through the 2000s. The diamond where the BNSF and Union Pacific lines crossed became one of the busiest rail intersections in the

Midwest. Trains per day went from a hundred to a hundred and twenty to a hundred and forty. The crossing gates were down more than they were up. Locals learned which streets to avoid during peak train times. Visitors kept coming to the park to watch the parade.

And then in December 2018, something happened that nobody had been particularly working toward but everyone appreciated when it arrived: the Rochelle Downtown Historic District was listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

The district encompassed the brick commercial core that had risen from the ashes in 1871 and the decades immediately after. The buildings were Italianate and vernacular commercial, modest but well-built, the kind of main street architecture that shows up in a thousand Midwestern towns but somehow survives in only a fraction of them. The designation didn't come with money or magic. It didn't fill the empty storefronts or bring back the businesses that had closed. But it did something else, something harder to quantify.

It said the past mattered. It said the buildings mattered. It said that what Rochelle had been was worth preserving, which implied that what Rochelle might become was worth pursuing.

The Class of '60 was turning seventy-six that year. The Class of '62 was seventy-four. The ones who had left were mostly still gone. The ones who

had stayed were mostly still there. The ones who had left and come back for reunions walked down Main Street and saw their childhood in brick, still standing, still solid, a little worn but recognizable.

The storefronts where they had bought school supplies were different businesses now, or no businesses at all, but the buildings were the same. The depot where they had said goodbye to friends heading to Viet Nam was quieter but still functional. The gym where they danced on Friday nights was gone because the old RTHS building had been demolished. The churches where they had been baptized and married and later mourned were still holding services. The limestone sills and cast-iron columns and decorative cornices that had seemed unremarkable in 1960 now looked like statements of permanence, proof that some things last.

By 2019 Rochelle settled into a kind of equilibrium. It wasn't growing the way Sun Belt cities grew, but it wasn't dying the way some prairie towns died. The population held steady around nine thousand. The railroad remained the economic anchor, employing hundreds directly and supporting hundreds more indirectly. The Railroad Park brought in tourists and their dollars. The historic district gave downtown a framework for renewal, even if renewal came slowly. The schools graduated classes every spring. The churches held services. The lodges, fewer now than in their peak years but still present, still met.

Hub City had figured out how to be a hub in a century that measured connections differently than the last one. The trains still mattered. The roads still mattered. But now there was a third thing, harder to name, which was the idea that Rochelle was worth visiting not because you had to pass through it but because you wanted to see it. The railfans had proven that. Maybe others would follow.

The town that the Class of '60 graduated from in 1960 was gone, but the town that replaced it was still recognizably Rochelle. Still Hub City. Still standing at the crossroads. Still figuring out, year by year, what comes next.

And what came next, as it turned out, involved wind and loss and the kind of choices communities make when forces beyond their control make choices for them.

But that's the final chapter.

Chapter Six
Shocks & Pivots

The thing about small towns is that they get good at absorbing shocks. They have to. When your population is nine thousand and your economy rests on a handful of major employers and the whims of weather and markets and corporate headquarters in distant cities, you learn to roll with changes or you disappear. Rochelle had been rolling with changes since 1871. By 2015 it had plenty of practice.

Some changes arrive with warning. Others arrive on a Thursday afternoon in April with rotating clouds and a sound like freight trains, which is an unfortunate comparison in a town that

hears actual freight trains a hundred and forty times a day.

The tornado that hit Rochelle on April 9, 2015 was an EF3, which is the kind of rating that means something to meteorologists and everything to people in its path. It carved a track through the north side of town, damaging homes and businesses and the high school and the civic infrastructure that holds a community together. Roofs disappeared. Trees that had been standing since the 1950s were suddenly horizontal. Power lines came down. For a few hours Rochelle looked like the kind of place that makes the national news for all the wrong reasons.

And then the town did what small towns do, which is clean up and rebuild and get on with it. Volunteers showed up with chainsaws and work gloves. The churches organized meal trains. The insurance adjusters arrived and wrote their reports. FEMA came and went. Within weeks the debris was cleared. Within months the repairs were underway. Within a year you could walk through the affected neighborhoods and see only the newest roofs and the youngest trees, evidence of survival rather than disaster.

The tornado was dramatic but brief. The economic shifts were quieter and lasted longer.

Swift, which had opened in 1960 as a symbol of Rochelle's industrial future, closed its slaughter operations in phases through the early 2000s. The

plant that had employed hundreds and defined careers and shaped family decisions about staying or leaving was gone. The building remained, repurposed for other uses, but the jobs were gone and the identity that came with them was gone too. Families that had counted on Swift the way earlier generations had counted on the railroad had to count on something else.

The Silgan can plant, descendant of the Rochelle Canneries acquired by Calpak in 1925, continued operations but with a fraction of the workforce it had employed during the peak harvest years of mid-century. Automation did what automation always does, which is make production more efficient and employment less certain. The seasonal rhythms that had structured summer jobs for high school students gave way to year-round operations with specialized machinery and fewer hands.

But Rochelle, true to its Hub City identity, found other ways to be a hub.

The railroad remained the anchor, busier than ever. The BNSF and Union Pacific lines carried more freight than they had in decades. Inter-modal traffic, containers stacked on flatcars bound for distribution centers across the Midwest, rolled through the diamond at all hours. The trains that railfans came to watch were also the trains that carried the economy, goods moving from coast to coast and point to point, using Rochelle as one of

ten thousand intersections that make modern commerce possible.

And where trains go, trucks follow. Distribution and logistics companies, looking for well-connected locations with available land and reasonable costs, discovered Rochelle. Warehouses went up on the edges of town. Third-party logistics firms moved in. The jobs weren't the same as Swift jobs or cannery jobs, but they were jobs, and they paid, and they required the same thing those earlier jobs had required, which was people willing to show up and work.

The downtown, armed now with its National Register designation, began a slow pivot of its own. The historic district wasn't a silver bullet. It didn't fill every storefront or reverse every trend. But it provided a framework for thinking about what Main Street could be if it stopped trying to be what it had been in 1960 and started figuring out what it might be in 2025.

Some of the old storefronts became new things. Coffee shops, craft breweries, small restaurants, the kind of businesses that thrive on local loyalty and the modest tourist traffic that the Railroad Park generates. Antique stores and consignment shops filled spaces that had once been dry goods emporiums and furniture showrooms. The buildings stayed the same. The businesses inside them evolved.

The churches remained, though some consolidated, merging congregations as memberships aged and younger families found other Sunday morning commitments. The lodges were fewer, their meeting halls quiet more often than not, but the ones that remained maintained their traditions and their networks. The schools graduated classes every spring, still filled with eighteen year olds making the same choices, stay or go, build or leave, put down roots or follow possibilities elsewhere.

The Railroad Park, now in its third decade, continued to draw visitors from improbable distances. On any given day you could find someone from Germany or Japan or California sitting in the pavilion with a camera and a notebook, logging locomotive numbers and train times with the focused intensity that comes from genuine enthusiasm. They spent money in town. They told their friends. They came back. Rochelle had stumbled into niche tourism and discovered it was surprisingly sustainable.

By 2025 Rochelle had learned to be several things at once. It was still a railroad town, trains threading through it day and night. It was still a highway town, Route 30 still carrying traffic though the Lincoln Highway Association now emphasized history as much as routing. It was a logistics hub, warehouses and distribution centers replacing some of what the plants had been. It was a historic district, brick storefronts from 1871

standing as evidence of continuity. It was a destination for people who loved trains. It was home to nine thousand people who mostly didn't think about any of this, who went to work and raised families and lived their lives in the unremarkable way that constitutes most of human experience.

The Class of '60 was eighty-three now, the ones who were still around. Some had come back for the sixty-fifth reunion and walked down Main Street and marveled at what had changed and what hadn't. Some had never left, their entire lives contained within a ten-mile radius of where they graduated. Some had left and stayed gone, building lives in other places, remembering Rochelle the way you remember childhood, with affection and distance and the slight unreality that comes from time.

The town they remembered was not the town that now exists in 2025, but then towns are never the same as their memories. The brick is the same. The streets run the same directions. The trains still come through. But the people are different and the businesses are different and the reasons for staying or leaving are different.

What hasn't changed is the geography. Rochelle is still at the crossroads. North still meets south. East still meets west. The trains still cross. The highway still runs through. And the choices are still the same ones they've always been: build

something here, or build something elsewhere. Stay and become part of the place, or leave and carry it with you.

Hub City endures, not because nothing changes but because the hub itself, the crossing point, the place where paths intersect, remains constant even as everything moving through it changes. The trains are different now. The cars are different. The people are different. But the crossing is still the crossing.

And that, in the end, is what towns are: crossings where people meet, pause, stay a while or keep moving, and by their meeting and pausing and staying create something larger than any individual path. Rochelle has been doing this since someone looked at a prairie intersection in the 1850s and thought: general store. It's still doing it now. It will probably keep doing it for a while yet.

The history isn't finished. History never is, not for places that are still inhabited. But this particular telling of it, from prairie to present, from plat to pivot, comes to rest here, in 2025, with Hub City still standing at the crossroads, still figuring out what comes next, still home to people whose grandparents made choices in 1960 that ripple forward into grandchildren making choices now.

Some things last. Brick lasts. Rails last. The crossroads last. And the stories we tell about them, looking back from whatever crossing we find

ourselves standing on, those last too, at least as long as someone is around to tell them.

Which is to say, they last long enough.